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Big Oil Gets to Teach Climate Science in American Classrooms

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Body

(Bloomberg) - If you were an elementary school student in Oklahoma, you might meet Petro Pete, a cartoon child outfitted in the overalls and hard hat of an oil rig worker. Through Pete, you might learn things like "having no petroleum is like a nightmare!" Meanwhile Pete's trusty blue dog, Repete, assures the animal kingdom that "the humans learned their lesson and now they don't leave behind a mess when they drill for oil." Who would you have to thank for these important academic messages? Oklahoma Oil & Natural Gas, a fossil fuel industry trade group.

In Ohio, children may complete a word search sponsored by the state's oil and gas industry, with answers such as "lubricants" and "carbon black," while in New Jersey students in grades three through six may receive a workbook titled "Natural Gas: Your Invisible Friend." The National Energy Education Development Project, backed by 100 oil and gas industry players, promotes lessons on fracking using Jell-O and other fun foods as teaching aids.

The stakes for how children and young adults learn about **climate** change—the science, the politics, the implications—are extremely high. Environmentalists know this. So, clearly, do fossil fuel companies. "Industry groups recognized the value of classrooms for marketing and propaganda decades ago," says Carroll Muffett, president and chief executive of the Center for International Environmental Law. "It's where you shape someone's understanding of your product and of your company and of your issues. In a school context, you're shaping their understanding of the world."

More on **Climate** Education:

One of the many ironies of K-12 education on **climate** change is that among the parents, at least, there's little discord. More than 80% of parents said that they want schools to teach their children about **climate** change, according to a 2019 NPR/Ipsos poll. That survey also found that whether people have children or not, nine out of 10 Democrats and two-thirds of Republicans agree that the subject needs to be taught in schools.

Yet the forces trying to suppress accurate science teachings remain relentless, says Elizabeth Allan, president of the National Science Teaching Association. Allan teaches **climate** change to many students in Oklahoma whose parents work in the oil industry, and they come to class with preconceived ideas about what **climate** change is and isn't. "When I'm talking to them, it doesn't lessen the science," she says, "or the need for them to understand or examine fossil fuels and human contributions to it."

Allan's organization, which has 40,000 members, is the largest science teaching membership organization in the U.S. Its website offers sample lessons and guidance for constructing scientifically-sound **climate** change curriculum to try and rebut the fossil fuel interests. "The younger you are" when you first encounter **climate** change, she says, "the more aware you are that **climate** science is real and that there are real consequences for the future."

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Ben Abbott, a science teacher in Orem, Utah, says that he's often approached by teenagers and adults asking him questions about science-related things ranging from how the atmosphere works to how light waves reflect, but most often, they're about climate.

Even when his questioners are 18 and younger, they're often already intensely curious and concerned. Abbott knows better than to try to argue the facts. "Most people believe what they believe not because they have considered other options, but because of the people around them that they trust, people in their community have told them," he says. "That changes the dynamic. You no longer think, 'Oh, these people are dumb.'" The cycle of influence flows both ways, though. Evidence exists that children—who may be heavily influenced by their parents' political ideologies but are also less entrenched in a single set of beliefs—can change their parents' minds about climate change.

Aside from the corporate influence on curriculum, much of how climate change is taught varies by state, leading to a patchwork of outcomes. At least 10 states, including Texas, offer teachers little to no guidance on the topic of climate change. No states currently prohibit lessons on man-made environmental issues, while in June of last year, New Jersey became the first state in the country to require climate change education in its public schools.

The new rule "goes that extra step," says Guida Faria, a K-12 science supervisor for Fanwood School District in Scotch Plains, N.J., and president of the New Jersey Science Teachers Association. "Before, the standards said that you should look at how humans impact the Earth and now climate change is explicitly put there," Faria says. Now teachers don't have a choice. The guidelines, which will impact more than 1.4 million students, cover seven different subjects, including physical education, social studies, and the visual and performing arts.

On the one hand, some teachers might be wary of addressing what is still, after decades of misinformation on the subject, a controversial issue. On the other hand, says Faria, the policy gives teachers cover should they face any public blowback.

The question is how to teach them—and often, how much to scare them. The American Academy of Pediatrics' policy position on children and climate change notes that "the social foundations of children's mental and physical health are threatened by the specter of far-reaching effects of unchecked climate change, including community and global instability, mass migrations, and increased conflict."

There's a valid case that children should be terrified of the multi-generational failure of adults to rein in the problem they created and political leadership in Washington that still regards climate change as little more than a hoax. But young people don't see it as an abstract threat. When the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation polled U.S. teenagers in the summer of 2019 on their feelings toward climate change, 57% said it made them feel "afraid," while 43% said it made them feel helpless. Those feelings can be especially difficult for younger kids to deal with. One episode of the HBO drama *Big Little Lies* revolves around a grade school-aged girl who has a panic attack during a classroom discussion of sustainability, folded into a lesson about Charlotte's Web.

When the students (and adults) Abbott encounters express doubt that climate change is real, he tries to start with simple physical science ideas where there's common ground—how the scientific method works, the properties of water, what plants need to live—and work his way outward, one lesson at a time. "The temptation is to do a data blast," says Abbott, who has a PhD in ecosystems ecology. "To say, 'I know stuff.' It's really easy. But if you're persuading or connecting, you have to start toward that place of cultivating compassion. The goal is for students to leave with a feeling of urgency and empowerment."

The good news, Abbott says, is that because climate change is man-made, it stands to reason we just might be able to unmake it if we act quickly. "I frame it as, 'Humans are in charge.'"

As some educators lean into the macro lessons, others localize. Timothy Gay, a high school science teacher in Boston, tells his students to look at the implications of climate change along the New England coastline, ranging from flood risks to mass unemployment in the lobster industry should the deterioration of the world's oceans continue.

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Once kids are old enough to handle it, a little fear into them can be motivating-especially given the recent resurgence in youth activism around the world. "When I first started teaching [15 years ago], it was all **doom** and gloom," Gay says. "But there's been a shift in the student psyche. They want to solve the problem. It's a big issue on the planet, we have the science but now they want to figure out local solutions."

The truth of **climate** change is laid especially bare in the classroom of Nancy Metzger-Carter, who teaches in Sonoma County, Calif. She's taught **climate** change for 14 years, she says, but "the way I teach now is totally different." Several of her students were displaced by the wildfires that burned through more than 4 million acres in the state last year. Yes, lessons in turning out the lights when you leave the room, calculating carbon footprints, and choosing electric cars come up. "But to me, those solutions always felt like they were not enough," she says. "It's an equity issue. I can't tell a kid who can't afford school lunch to become a vegetarian. It really ignited in me that wow, this is a huge, systemic problem that's happening that requires systemic solutions."

It's not uncommon for science teachers themselves to be confused about the facts. A survey of teachers published in Science in 2016 found that many of them, intentionally or not, are passing along that incomplete understanding to their students. Nearly one in three incorrectly taught that global warming is not man-made.

Metzger-Carter herself has engaged in activism on the federal level. Along with a group of her high schoolers, she helped draft House Resolution 574, "Supporting the teaching of **climate** change in schools," introduced by Rep. Barbara Lee, a Democrat from the California district encompassing Oakland and Berkeley. "We want to empower students and really call out what needs to happen, which is a massive, systemic policy change," Metzger-Carter says.

Her co-writers included Ella Crenshaw, 17, and Blue Stringer, 17, who set up virtual meetings with lawmakers in Washington to share their first-person stories about **climate** change and advocate for more green-friendly legislation. When the fires in September turned the skies outside their windows Mars orange, they were scared, they say, but they were also prepared-and that made them really, really angry.

Having lived through a previous series of devastating wildfires four years ago, Crenshaw says she automatically began to think of what possessions she should pack if she and her family had to evacuate. "I thought, 'Is there a fire coming down the hill like in 2017?'" Crenshaw says. She and her family turned out not to be in danger, but signing into Zoom school "felt almost disrespectful-the whole day felt weird," she says. Because of their **climate** change lessons in school, there was no ambiguity in her understanding of what was transpiring. "With **climate** change, this is only going to multiply," Crenshaw says

Stringer chimes in. "**Climate** change is such an intense, global issue," she says. "You can't ignore that fact. You can't escape the fires here and there are so many different times where the issue is constantly being brought back to us."

"I think our generation really acknowledges this is falling on our shoulders," Crenshaw adds. "It's up to us."

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